

**Understanding Text Complexity:  
Implications for Teaching Struggling Readers  
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This handout consolidates key slides from the PowerPoint presentation.

**Five Questions to Frame the Learning Goals**

1. What are the features of complex text?
2. What distinguishes simple messages from complex messages within texts?
3. What is the influence of text structures, literary devices, and figurative language on text complexity?
4. What is the role of themed sets in activating the reader's expectancies for text meanings?
5. How can the teacher scaffold the reader to ensure a successful and meaningful reading experience?

**A Quick Look at the Three Elements of Text Complexity**

- Qualitative Elements of Text
  - Levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands
- Quantitative Elements of Text
  - Readability measures, such as word length or frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion
- Matching Reader to Text and Task
  - Reader variables (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and task variables (such as purpose and the complexity generated by the task assigned and the questions posed)

**Three Questions to Keep the Focus on Text Meaning**

1. What does the reader already know that relates to the text meaning?
2. What does the author want the reader to know about the text meaning?
3. What can the teacher do to ensure the reader understands the author's meaning?

**What distinguishes simple meanings from complex meanings?**

**Simple Texts**

**Meaning**

Single layers of meaning

Explicit purpose

**Text Structures**

Simple patterns

Explicit

Conventional

Chronologically ordered events

Simple graphs

**Language Elements**

Literal

Clear

Contemporary, familiar

**Complex Texts**

**Meaning**

Multiple layers of meaning

Implicit, hidden, obscure purpose

**Text Structures**

Complex patterns

Implicit

Unconventional

Manipulation of time and sequence

Sophisticated graphics essential to the text

**Language Elements**

Figurative or ironic

Ambiguous or purposefully misleading

Archaic or unfamiliar

Conversational  
**Background Knowledge**

Single theme  
Common experiences  
Single perspective

Academic or domain specific  
**Background Knowledge**

Multiple themes  
Distinctly different experiences  
Perspective unlike or in opposition to one's own

**Questions in Selecting Series Books:**

- Do the cover illustration and the title help predict the story?
- Is there a blurb on the book or inside flap to set the scene?
- How long is each chapter? Can a chapter be read in a single setting?
- Is each chapter an episode or one long story that continues across the book?
- Do the same characters appear in all the books in the series?
- Are there any repeating phrases or vocabulary that occur across books in the series?
- Does the lead of the chapter provide a quick introduction to character and setting?

**The next section presents a brief overview of how texts are structured along a continuum of difficulty (see *Teaching for Deep Comprehension* by Dorn & Soffos, 2005). Then we will move into how teachers select texts to match the needs of struggling readers, including how an integrated workshop provides the framework for scaffolding students to read and deconstruct complex text.**

**Easy Readers (K-3)**

- Small-book format, divided into sections that resemble chapters.
- Simple illustrations to break up the text and promote comprehension.
- Simple plot with one main event and one main character (may include secondary 1-2 characters)
- Lots of dialogue to move the plot along
- Some examples include series books such as *Frog and Toad* books by Arnold Lobel, *Nate the Great* books by Marjorie Sharmat, and Peggy Parish's *Amelia Bedelia* stories.

**Chapter Books (2-4<sup>th</sup> grades)**

- Include many short chapters, but do not rely as heavily on illustrations as easy readers do.
- Characters are children with everyday problems and issues that relate to a child's world.
- Contain lots of dialogue to move the action along.
- Contain a variety of sentence structures and more complex vocabulary.
- Stories are fast paced and may include a complicated plot and several characters.
- Examples of series books include *Junie B. Jones* books by Barbara Park, *The Kids of Polk Street* by Patricia Reilly Giff, and *The Magic Treehouse* adventure series by Mary Pope Osborne. Higher-level chapter books include *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White and *Ribsy*, *Henry Huggins*, and *Ramona* titles by Beverly Cleary.

**Beginning Novels (grades 4-7)**

- Plots are often more complex than chapter books, usually built around issues that students at this age are concerned with, including family and peer relationships.
- Illustrations are rarely seen, and there is not much white space on the page.
- Lots of dialogue, complicated plot, and several characters
- Variety of sentence structures, figurative language, and complex vocabulary
- Some examples include realistic fiction, such as *Crash* by Jerry Spinelli, *Bud, not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis, and historical fiction, such as *A Break with Charity* by Ann Rinadli, and series novels, such as *Harry Potter* by J. K. Rowling.

**Emergent Text Characteristics**

- Focus on a single idea
- Simple story line
- Direct correspondence between text/pictures
- Relate topics to own personal experience
- Text language supports/duplicates oral language
- Includes naturally occurring syntactic structures
- Format is consistent
- Layout is supportive
- Print is regular, clear and easy to see
- Range of punctuation is present (capitalization, period, question, exclamation)
- 1-3 lines of text

**Early Text Characteristics**

- Simple story lines with interesting and/or humorous endings to slightly more complex episodes
- Familiar concepts
- Likeable characters; concrete actions
- Supportive illustrations
- Dialogue
- Varied punctuation
- Longer sentences
- High occurrence of common words
- New syntactic structures (e.g., prepositional phrases, adverbs)
- Known vocabulary includes inflectional ending
- Two to six lines of print

**Transitional Text Characteristics**

- Text setup
- Hooks
- Dialogue
- Book and chapter leads
- Continuation or stand alone chapters
- Table of contents and titles
- Historical, social, and content information embedded in text
- Descriptive and figurative language
- Changes in time
- Point of view

- Genre structure
- Mood or tone
- Complexity of story elements
- Pictures are less supportive

### **Features that Contribute to Text Complexity**

- Genre/Forms
- Text Structure
- Content
- Themes and Ideas
- Language and Literary Features
- Sentence Complexity
- Figurative and Academic Vocabulary
- Uncommon words
- Illustrations
- Book and Print Features

### **Literary Devices that Contribute to Text Complexity**

*Flashback* – To present past events during current events in order to provide background for the current narration

*Foreshadowing* – To suggest future events in a story before they happen

*Figurative language* - To describe something by comparing it with something else

*Simile* – To compare two otherwise dissimilar objects or ideas, generally using ‘like’ or ‘as’

*Metaphor* – To call something one thing that it is not without using words such as “like’ or ‘as’

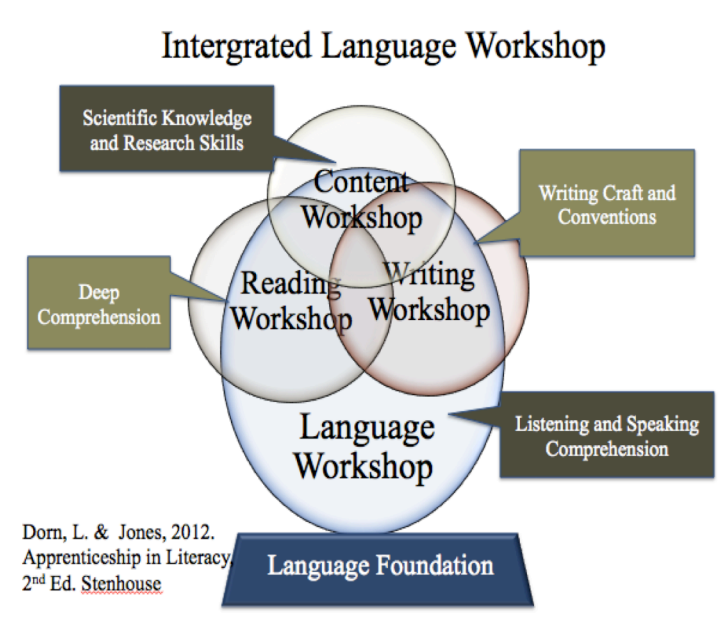
*Personification* – To endow inanimate objects or abstract concepts with human traits

*Imagery* – To describe something in detail, using words to activate the senses

*Symbolism* – To use meaningful concept (person, place, object) to suggest a new meaning

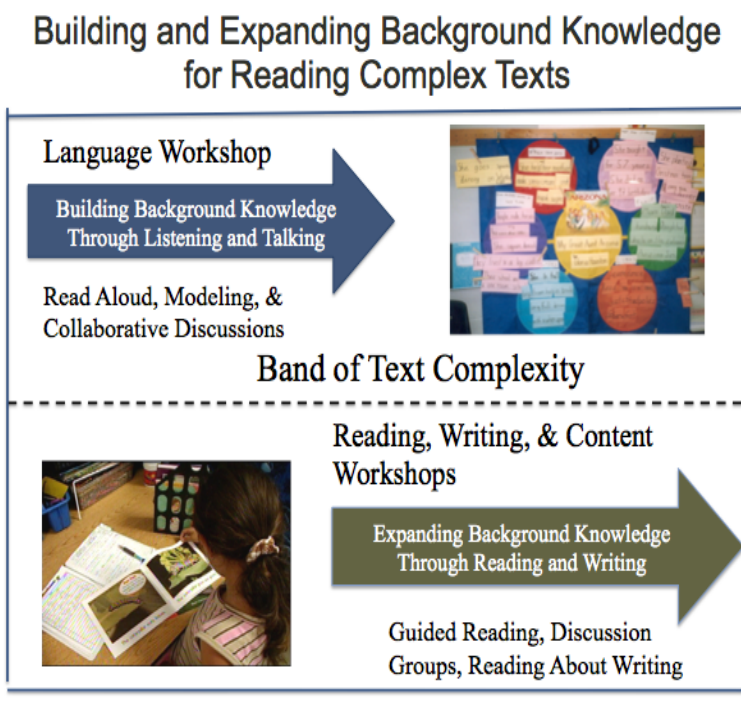
**The curriculum must provide a balance of rigor and support with adjustable scaffolds and opportunities for independent practice on complex materials. An integrated workshop presents the framework for accomplishing this goal.**

## Integrated Workshop Framework for Building and Using Language in Complex Ways



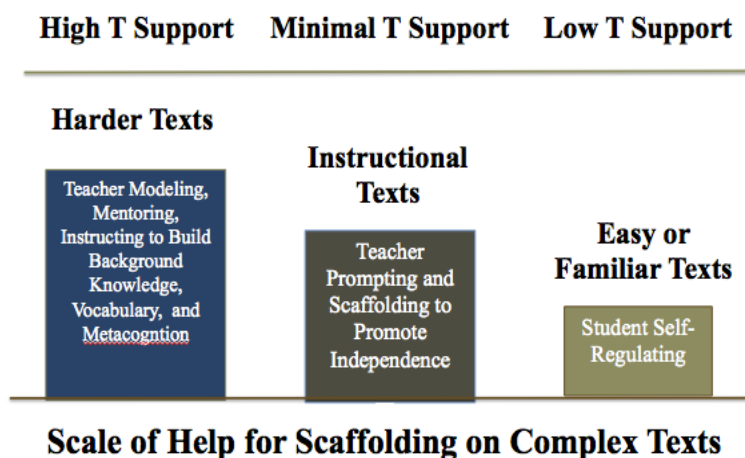
Oral language is the foundation on which written language is built. In order for children to anticipate complex structures within texts, they need to hear and speak these structures during meaningful, oral interactions around texts. A well-designed integrated workshop provides the structure that enables children to build complex, flexible language systems for using across the curriculum, not just during the reading of complex texts.

Source: Dorn, L. J. & Jones, T. (2012). *Apprenticeship in Literacy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Stenhouse.



During language workshop, the teacher uses complex texts to engage students in interactive read-aloud lessons that focus on text structure, vocabulary, author craft, and close reading strategies for deeper comprehension. During reading workshop, the children participate in guided reading groups and/or literature discussion groups with themed texts at their instructional levels. During writing workshop, the children use their knowledge of structure, conventions, and craft to write for different audiences and purposes. During content workshop, the children use literacy strategies to navigate content materials for research purposes.

## Teacher Scaffolding on Complex Texts



Teachers use themed sets with varying degrees of complexity to enable students to make connections among texts, e.g., concepts, vocabulary, text structures, writing styles, characters, theme, etc. The teacher uses the harder texts as mentor texts, while providing a high degree of scaffolding to support student learning. With this background, the children are able to read successfully higher-level texts during their instructional reading groups. During independent reading, the children select books from the themed set.

Use themed text sets with degrees of complexity to scaffold language and literacy learning. When selecting texts that will stretch students, teachers should consider these factors: length of book, genre type, vocabulary load, knowledge demands, interest levels, reader's stamina, and word accuracy levels.

Texts can be hard because students lack sufficient background knowledge. If students have multiple texts on the same topic at different levels of complexity, the easier texts can help students build the background knowledge for the more difficult ones and notice connections across texts. Also, the overlap in important concepts can help students notice the information in different contexts; and the multiple exposures to vocabulary can help them develop deeper meanings.